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INFO RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

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DEPT FOR EUR/SCE (P. PETERSON)

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV MARR PREL SR

SUBJECT: SERBIA: PRESIDENT FIRES ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF PONOS

REF: BELGRADE 1332

**¶1.** (U) Following several hours of debate in the National Security Council on December 29, President Tadic announced on December 30 that he had relieved Army Chief of Staff (CHOD) Zdravko Ponos of his official duties. While the short announcement on the presidency web site did not provide any details, the media reported that many in the government had sided with Minister of Defense Dragan Sutanovac during Cabinet and Security Council discussions of the open conflict between the two (reftel).

**¶2.** (U) Deputy Chief of Staff Miloje Miletic has been named to replace Ponos temporarily until President Tadic appoints a new CHOD.

**¶3.** (SBU) Comment: While we do not yet know all the reasons for the conflict between Sutanovac and Ponos, or why Tadic allowed it to fester until it became public, it appears at this point to be another example of political rivalries being played out at the expense of national interests. Although the loss of an experienced and energetic interlocutor such as Ponos will undoubtedly result in delays until his successor is appointed and gets up to speed, we do not believe that his firing signals a fundamental policy shift on the part of the Serbian government; we expect bilateral mil-to-mil cooperation and Serbia's cooperation with NATO to continue. End comment.

BRUSH